

Hunting Prairie Chickens – Again

By Ron Wilson

A Chance to Hunt

Resident hunters can apply for a 2005 prairie grouse license by sending a postcard to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department at 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, N.D. 58501.

The postcard should include name, address, phone number, and hunting unit. Applications must be into the Game and Fish Department by August 10. Only one application per postcard and one application per hunter is permitted.



The lag between prairie chicken hunts this time around is hardly noticeable.

In 2004, North Dakota held its first hunting season for these nonnatives in nearly six decades. Riding the crest of a successful 2004 outing, teamed with a healthy bird population, North Dakota Game and Fish Department officials have proposed a prairie chicken season again for fall, with minor adjustments.

The season, opening on October 8, has been bumped from 2004's nine-day hunt to 16 days in 2005. And instead of a two-bird

limit, wildlife officials are proposing a three-bird bag, two of which may be prairie chickens. "Hunters in 2004 were careful about whether they flushed sharptails or prairie chickens before they shot," said Jerry Kobriger, Department upland game management supervisor.

The limit change, Kobriger said, may help increase the harvest of sharp-tailed grouse, while not affecting the prairie chicken harvest. "We don't have a shortage of sharptails, especially in the southeast," he said. Plus, this change will make limits for all upland game

birds in the state the same and eliminate any confusion.

Again, the areas open to hunting will be in Grand Forks County (north unit) and southeastern North Dakota (south unit). Hunters, who apply for the chance to participate, must designate on their applications the unit they choose to hunt. Fifty licenses will be issued for each unit this fall, the same as 2004.

Prairie chickens, or pinnated grouse, arrived in North Dakota in the late 1800s on the heels of settlers before nearly passing into obscurity decades later. Their story is one of boom and almost bust. Good pinnated grouse years were from 1900-1930. By the 1960s, North Dakota's population was estimated at about 4,000-5,000 birds. Prior to 2004, the last hunting season for these non-natives was 1945.

The Game and Fish Department received 531 applications in 2004 for the 100 available prairie chicken licenses. There were 250 applications for the north unit and 249 applications for the south unit. Thirty-two applications did not specify a hunting unit.

"I thought the season (in 2004) went really well," Kobriger said. "There were a lot of positive comments from hunters – and no landowner complaints – and I'm really encouraged by that."

According to a summary of the first prairie chicken season in nearly 60 years, 81 prairie grouse – 51 prairie chickens and 30 sharp-tails – were shot by hunters. The number of birds harvested was expected to have little or no influence on this spring's grouse numbers. The 39 prairie chickens shot near Grand Forks was less than 5 percent of the

fall population. The 12 prairie chickens taken in southeastern North Dakota was less than 1 percent of the fall population in that unit.

Nearly 80 percent of the hunters in 2004 hunted four or fewer days. Hunters near Grand Forks had better success than those in southeastern North Dakota, even though hunters in the latter unit spent more days afield. "I was a little surprised so few birds were shot in the south unit, but then they had some tougher weather to deal with during the season," Kobriger said. "According to some of the comments we received, hunters were seeing their share of prairie chickens, but had some trouble getting within shotgun range."

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.



Hunting Notes

Some particulars about the proposed 2005 North Dakota prairie grouse season:

- Season dates – October 8-23.
- Shooting hours – Half-hour before sunrise to sunset.
- Licenses – Fifty licenses for each of the two hunting units.
- Open areas – South Unit: an area in southeastern North Dakota east of North Dakota Highway 32, north of North Dakota Highway 11, and south of the Sheyenne River. North Unit: an area in Grand Forks County east of North Dakota Highway 18, north of U.S. Highway 2, and south of the Walsh-Grand Forks county line.
- Limit – Proposal is to increase the bag limit to three grouse. Of the three grouse allowed on each license, only two may be prairie chickens.
- Tags – All birds harvested will have to be tagged (provided by the Game and Fish Department) prior to transportation.